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XII.—SOME FRIENDS OF CHAUCER

Though no new light seems forthcoming on the nature of the accusation made by Cecily Chaumpaigne against Chaucer, the names of the witnesses (to her release) are not without interest. Of the five witnesses, four ¹ were prominent men in their day. Of the fifth, however, nothing has hitherto been known.

Richard Morel was a grocer ² whose name first occurs in a list of "certain good folk" of London in 1378-9, from whom the mayor and aldermen borrow certain sums of money.³ In 1384 he is living in Aldgate Ward, and is a member of the Common Council.⁴ Two weeks later (15 Aug.) he is one of the "good and sufficient" men summoned to the King's Council at Reading to hear the trial of John Northampton.⁵ In the following year (1385) the

¹ Sir William de Beauchamp, chamberlain of the King, John de Clanebowe (Clanvowe), a Lollard, and William de Neville, Knights, John Philippott grocer and afterwards Mayor of London (*Life Records*, pp. 225 f.).

² *Grocers Company*, edited Kingdon. London, 1886, 2 vols., I, pp. 58, 68.

³ *Calendar of Letter-Books, H*, edited R. R. Sharpe. London, 1907, p. 125. Of the 150 or so contributors about 125 (including Morel) gave each 5 marks. The Mayor gave 10 £, and the remainder 4 and 5 £ each. The City had been charged with crimes against the Lords of the realm who were withdrawing from the city, thereby damaging the victuallers and hostellers. As the city had no funds, and the Mayor wished to bring about reconciliation, this process was resorted to.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 238. Others from Aldgate Ward were William Badby and John Halstede. On the latter see *infra*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 248. A number of the prominent people of London were summoned to this meeting, including some of Chaucer's business friends. Morel appears to have been the only delegate from Aldgate.

mayor "caused good men of each Ward" to meet in the Council chamber to take steps against the threatened invasion of the French. Among those summoned from Aldgate Ward were Richard Morel and John Cobham (fellow J. P. of Chaucer).⁶ In 1386 Morel and William Tonge (vintner and alderman from Aldgate Ward in 1381)⁷ were collectors of murage for the "suburbs without 'la posterne' and for 'la posterne.'" ⁸

In 1388 the Mayor and Aldermen order certain Commons to meet "at the Guildhall on Monday next at 8 o'clock, under penalty of 20 s., to consult on certain matters touching the coming Parliament and the City itself." Richard Morel was among those from Aldgate.⁹ In 1389 he is one of the sureties for the minor of a fellow merchant (John Halstede),¹⁰ also of Aldgate Ward.¹¹ Morel was a member of the Grocers Company,¹² and died before 1397.¹³

It is not difficult to see what sort of man Richard Morel was. He was a grocer of modest means, presumably a retailer, yet sufficiently prominent to be a member of the Grocers Company. He was likewise identified with the civic affairs of London, and also belonged to the Brembre

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁷ Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, London, 1908, p. 10.

⁸ *Letter-Book H*, p. 300. The surveyors of murage were Nicholas Exton (cf. *Life Records*, p. 268), Henry Vanner (cf. *Life Records*, p. 284), and others.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 345. Morel is here mentioned as a merchant.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

¹² *Grocers Company, etc.*, I, pp. 58, 68. His name occurs in the lists of members who were clothed in livery at Christmas in 1383 and 1386.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 76. At any rate his name does not appear in the list of members for that year.

faction which was particularly favored by the King. Why he should appear with several eminent men as a witness for Chaucer we shall, of course, never know. It is highly probable, however, that he was a personal friend of the poet, and, as a resident of Aldgate Ward, may well have been Chaucer's neighbor.

At the meeting of the Council which Morel attended in 1384 there "were read divers articles by many wise and discreet men."¹⁴ Among the numerous important business matters disposed of, one is of peculiar interest to students of Chaucer. At this meeting it was "agreed that Ralph Strode should have 4 marks annual rent for loss of a mansion over the gate of Aldrichesgate."¹⁵

That the philosophical Ralph Strode of Oxford, inseparably linked with *Troilus and Criseyde*, is identical with the Ralph Strode of London, has never been definitely known. Israel Gollancz¹⁶ is non-committal when he states: "It is noteworthy that soon after the references to Strode cease in the Merton records, a 'Radulphus Strode' obtained a reputation as a lawyer in London. He was common serjeant of the city between 1375 and 1385,¹⁷ and was granted the gate of Aldrich-gate, *i. e.* Aldersgate." Gollancz assumes identity when he says: "The fact that Chaucer was in possession of Aldgate, and resided there at the same date as the Common-serjeant Strode occupied Aldersgate, suggests the possibility of friendly intercourse between the two." Coulton¹⁸ sees "no obvious reason to

¹⁴ *Letter-Book H*, p. 240.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 245. Cf. Introduction, p. xxxiii; *Dic. Natl. Biog.* under Strode.

¹⁶ *Dic. Natl. Biog.* under Strode. Cf. Skeat, *Chaucer* (Complete Works), II, p. 505.

¹⁷ This is an error. Strode was appointed in 1373 (*Letter-Book G*, p. 317).

¹⁸ *Chaucer and his England*, London, 1908, p. 117.

dissociate the city lawyer from the Oxford scholar." Now, by means of an entry, dated 1374, doubts on this point can probably be removed. In this year Ralph Strode of London and Master John Wycliffe of Leicestershire were mainpernors for a parson.¹⁹ That two men, not friends, should go bail for a person is inconceivable. We do know that Wycliffe was associated in a friendly way with a Ralph Strode of Oxford.²⁰ We also know that a Ralph Strode of Oxford disappears when a Ralph Strode of London appears upon the records.²¹ Whether they are the same we have no absolute proof, but it is pretty difficult to believe that there should be two men with the same name associated with the great reformer.

The earliest reference to Ralph Strode of London is in 1373 (25 November), when he was elected Common Pleader²² of the city.²³ In 1375 (27 October) he was granted the mansion over Aldersgate including the gardens, to hold as long as he remained in office.²⁴ (Chaucer had received Aldgate and its gardens for life the year before). 4 November, 1377, the grant of the mansion was extended for life.²⁵ In 1382, during Northampton's mayoralty, we find a curious entry. We learn that Strode

¹⁹ Richard Beneger of Donyngton, Berkshire (*Cal. Close Rolls*, 1374-7, p. 94).

²⁰ *Dic. Natl. Biog.* under Strode. In fact they were colleagues at Merton.

²¹ *Ibid.* There was another Ralph Strode of London, son of Robert Strode, mercer. (*Letter-Book H*, p. 310).

²² *Communis narrator* or Common Serjeant.

²³ *Letter-Book G*, p. 317. Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 217, 249; *Ibid. H*, pp. 12, 38, 40, 73, 89.

²⁴ *Ibid. H*, p. 15. Cf. Riley, *Memorials*, p. 388.

²⁵ *Ibid. H*, p. 83. There is no mention of his tenancy of office. Appended to this grant is an account, undated, annulling "for certain reasons" the grant. Sharpe thinks this was appended in Northampton's mayoralty (*Ibid.*, p. 245, n.).

"had of his own accord relinquished his office, and thereby forfeited his title to the mansion (Aldrichgate)." ²⁶ This is cleared up when we learn that Strode received in 1384 (during Brembre's mayoralty) an annuity of 4 marks for the loss of the gate from which he had been "speciously ousted" during Northampton's mayoralty! ²⁷ In 1386 (4 May) this yearly grant was extended for life. ²⁸ (Chaucer lost Aldgate in the following October). 23 May (1386) Strode was appointed Standing Counsel for the city for seven years. For his services he is to receive 20 marks yearly and the same livery as the Chamberlain and Common Pleader. He is not to plead against any freeman of the city except in cases affecting the municipality or a gild, "or the orphans of the City or himself." ²⁹ In 1387, the year in which he died, ³⁰ he was a serjeant-at-arms ³¹—otherwise known as the Common Crier. ³²

Strode, therefore, like Morel, belonged to the Brembre faction which was particularly favored by the King. That he continued in the good graces of this faction until his death is likewise clear. Whatever may have been the reasons for Chaucer's downfall beginning with 1386, of this much we are certain: that in dedicating *Troilus and*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 245. This rent is to cease if he be restored to the mansion.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 287 f. This writing was delivered to Strode 18 Oct., 1386. There is no reference to "in case he be restored to the mansion."

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

³⁰ *Dic. Natl. Biog.* under Strode.

³¹ *Letter-Book H*, p. 306. It is not known when he was elected.

³² *Calendar of Wills, Court of Hustings*, London, 1889-1890, 2 Parts. Part I, p. xv. His duties were "to give notice to the judges of the sittings of the Court, and to open and adjourn the same." For oath taken see *Liber Albus I (Rolls Series, Vol. XII, London, 1859)*, pp. 310 f.

Criseyde to his friend Strode he was conferring an honor upon a man who was a favorite of the King's party.³³

It has been pointed out that Strode, as Standing Counsel for the City in which he was to plead for the orphans and the like, had had abundant experience as Common Pleader.³⁴ Chaucer students will recall that in 1375 the poet was made guardian of the heirs of Edmund Staplegate,³⁵ of Canterbury³⁶ and of John (de) Solys, of Kent.³⁷ Is it not possible that Chaucer owed his appointment—indirectly, to be sure—to his friend Strode? Brembre was one of the Collectors of Customs in this year—a known friend of Strode and the King. However that may be, we may be pretty certain that the two men often discussed matters pertaining to guardianship.³⁸

In connection with the Staplegate affair can be mentioned the name of another person inseparably linked with *Troilus and Criseyde*—John Gower. In 1386³⁹ and 1387⁴⁰ John Gower and Edmund Staplegate were among the purveyors of victuals at Dover Castle. Macaulay⁴¹

³³ Nor should we forget that Strode seemed to have been on friendly terms with Wycliffe who was supported by John of Gaunt (see *supra* and *Dic. Natl. Biog.* under Strode).

³⁴ *Cal. Letter-Book H*, p. 288, n. For Strode's hearing of cases affecting orphans, see *ibid.*, pp. 14, 28, 33, 53, 72, 84, 169. *Ibid. G*, pp. 201, 217.

³⁵ *Life Records*, pp. 196 f., 207 ff.

³⁶ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1350-4, p. 306; *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1364-8, p. 373.

³⁷ *Life Records*, p. 198. Of Nonington, Kent. *Ibid.*, p. 198, n.; *Cal. Close Rolls*, 1374-7, p. 164.

³⁸ We must not forget, either, that the wives had common bonds of sympathy, though the Chaucers did not lose Aldgate until several years after the Strodes forfeited their rights in Aldersgate. See *T. and C.* (Book v, vv. 263-4) for advice to young people.

³⁹ *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1385-9, p. 208.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁴¹ *The Complete Works of John Gower* (Oxford, 1902), 4 Vols., Vol. iv, p. xi. Bylsyngton manor, in possession of Staplegate, was but a short distance from Dover—in the marsh near New Romney (Cf. Hasted, Vol. viii, pp. 345 ff., 361; also Index, p. viii).

points out this fact but does not say it is the poet Gower. In view of the fact that Staplegate is his associate, the probabilities are that it is Gower the poet. Simon Burley, the Queen's favorite, was constable of Dover Castle at this time.⁴² Accepting these statements, then, we are forced to the conclusion that *Troilus and Criseyde* was dedicated to two friends who were members of the King's faction.⁴³

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⁴² *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1385-9, pp. 175-178, 216, 225, etc. See Index for further references.

⁴³ *The Nation* (March 20, 1913) contains an interesting letter by W. W. Comfort on the "Trials of a Housekeeper in 1400." He quotes extracts from Gower's *Mirour de l'omme*, in which the poet laments the vices of society. The poet attacks among others the victualling class. This poem, however, according to Macaulay was probably written by 1381 (*op. cit.*, I, p. xlii).